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Historicity, Politics of Culture, and Self-Fashioning: A New Historicist Reading of Shashi Tharoor Riot

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Abstract
Adopting a New Historicist lens, this paper contends that Riot: A Love Story by Shashi Tharoor operates as a complex literary intervention into the entangled terrains of historical construction, memory, and mythmaking. Engaging theories of historicity and the politics of cultural representation—wherein history is conceived as a narrative forged within structures of power and ideological hegemony—Riot interrogates the intricacies of national belonging amidst India's fraught postcolonial condition. Through its polyphonic and fragmented narrative form, the novel resists linear historiography and exposes the cultural politics underlying communal violence, simultaneously foregrounding the enduring legacies of colonialism, partition, and religious polarization. Central to this inquiry is the notion of self-fashioning, which the novel deploys as a means of identity negotiation within contested cultural landscapes. By fusing personal testimony with national trauma, Riot destabilizes official historical discourses and rearticulates Indian secularism through a lens that is at once critically historicized and culturally embedded. This paper situates Riot as a disruptive literary artifact that reimagines the intersections of power, memory, and identity in postcolonial India.

Keywords: Historicity, Politics of Culture, Self-Fashioning, and Cultural Identity

Introduction

Shashi Tharoor, regarded as one of India's leading public intellectuals, has established himself through an impressive career encompassing literature, diplomacy, public speaking, and political engagement. As a parliamentarian and cultural commentator, he has consistently articulated his views on democracy, colonial legacies, and pluralism. His literary corpus—both fiction and non-fiction—reflects an abiding engagement with India's heterogeneous ethos. Among his accolades are the 1991 Commonwealth Writers' Prize for The Great Indian Novel and the 2019 Sahitya Akademi Award for An Era of Darkness: The British Empire in India, both of which signify his sustained contributions to Indian letters. His novel Riot: A Love Story emerges as a powerful narrative preoccupied with the intersections of identity, history, and violence—key concerns within postcolonial and cultural discourse.

Riot: A Love Story (2001) presents a politically charged narrative centered on the enigmatic death of Priscilla Hart, an American volunteer involved in a women's health initiative in India, during a communal riot triggered by the Ram Sila Poojan program in the fictional town of Zalilgarh. Tharoor structures the novel using a polyphonic, non-linear approach that

incorporates interviews, diaries, government records, and news reports. This fragmented narrative technique mirrors the fractured and ideologically laden construction of memory, identity, and truth within Indian society. At the heart of the novel is Priscilla's illicit relationship with Lakshman, a middle-aged bureaucrat, which symbolizes the entangled tensions between East and West, tradition and modernity, and nationalism and liberal cosmopolitanism.

This paper engages Riot through the lens of New Historicism, a critical framework advanced by Stephen Greenblatt. Greenblatt argues that literature must be understood as "inextricably embedded in the social and historical contexts from which [it arises]" (Greenblatt 5). Accordingly, Riot does not simply reflect historical reality but participates in its construction. The novel exemplifies how literature and historical discourse are interwoven, particularly in the ways ideological tensions—such as communal polarization and postcolonial nationalism—are textually mediated. In this regard, Riot enacts the methodological imperatives of New Historicism by dramatizing how personal narratives are constituted by, and constitutive of, historical forces.

Louis Montrose's concept of historicity is central to understanding Riot's narrative architecture. As Montrose notes, texts are "culturally specific" and "socially embedded" (Montrose 20), and therefore historical narratives must be read as products of ideological negotiation rather than repositories of objective truth. Tharoor captures this dynamic when Lakshman asks, "But who owns India's history??" (Tharoor 110), underscoring how historical ownership is contested across religious and political divides. The novel's refusal to provide a singular or authoritative account of events reinforces Montrose's view that history is fragmented and contingent, shaped by competing cultural imperatives.

Montrose introduces the concept of the politics of culture, which views cultural expressions—literature, identity, and ideology—as battlegrounds for power and meaning. He contends that cultural texts are "historically determined and determining modes of cultural work" (Montrose 17). Riot embodies this principle through the ideological struggles it stages, particularly in the voice of Mohammad Sarwar: "What makes me a minority? Is it a mathematical concept? … Minorityhood is a state of mind" (Tharoor 193). This reflection situates identity within a discursive matrix of perception, representation, and authority. Thus, Tharoor's novel critiques how cultural designations like "minority" serve not as neutral descriptors but as politically charged constructs.

Stephen Greenblatt's notion of self-fashioning deepens this exploration of identity. Greenblatt argues that identity is shaped within—and often constrained by—social institutions like family, religion, and the state: "fashioning oneself and being fashioned by cultural institutions… were inseparably intertwined" (Greenblatt 256). Ram Charan Gupta's performative alignment with Hindu nationalist ideology exemplifies such self-fashioning, wherein his public self is a conscious articulation of collective religio-political sentiment. Likewise, the characters in Riot—from Priscilla to Lakshman—enact identities shaped by cultural pressure, ideological conflict, and historical memory. Riot becomes a textual space where history, culture, and identity are not only represented but enacted, contested, and reproduced.

Literature Review

Shashi Tharoor's Riot: A Love Story has been the subject of extensive critical analysis, especially for its engagement with communalism, political manipulation, gendered subjugation, and the unstable boundary between history and myth. Pramod Kumari, in her article "Ramifications of Religious Intolerance and Indian Nation: Tharoor's Riot", identifies the corrosive role of political opportunism in exacerbating communal divides in India. Kumari posits that politicians "appeal to voters on particular religious, caste, and geographic grounds" (Kumari 47), using identity as a tool for political consolidation. The tragic outcomes of this politicization are evident in the arbitrary suffering of innocents, as she observes, "a normal person could become a victim… without his or her fault" (Kumari 47). This notion aligns with Tharoor's fictional depiction of Priscilla Hart—an American volunteer caught in the throes of communal unrest. Her death encapsulates the

consequences of such divisions: “She died in a Riot she had nothing to do with” (Tharoor 3). Through Priscilla’s fate, Tharoor illustrates that in the machinery of politicized identity, innocence offers no protection, and pluralism becomes fractured by communal antagonism.

Prof. Dr. Jagadish S. Patil, in “Socio-Cultural Issues and Subjugation of Women in Shashi Tharoor’s Riot”, emphasizes the novel’s attention to gendered exploitation entrenched in patriarchal social structures. Patil argues that Tharoor exposes multiple forms of female subjugation such as “extra-marital affairs, dowry deaths, exploitation of women, violence in home and outside, repeated child births...” (Patil 258). These issues are not simply thematic concerns but integral to the novel’s social critique. A particularly compelling instance is the plight of Fatima Bi, a woman burdened by continuous childbirth. When Priscilla intervenes on her behalf, Fatima’s husband retorts with patriarchal authority: “I decide how my wife conducts her life!... Not her! And certainly not you!” (Tharoor 151). This episode underscores the normalized dominance of male agency over female autonomy, revealing the deeply ingrained misogyny in domestic and public spheres. Patil’s reading finds resonance in Tharoor’s portrayal of women’s suffering as a symptom of institutionalized male pride and cultural conservatism.

Riot probes the ambiguous relationship between myth and historical fact, a postmodern concern explored by Baidehi Mukherjee in “Myth and History = Mystery? - A Paradoxical Breach of Canon in the Novels of Shashi Tharoor”. Mukherjee highlights the novel’s “ambiguity in the postmodern interpretation of the tropes of ‘history’ and ‘myth’” (Mukherjee 63), suggesting that this deliberate blurring destabilizes any fixed reading of truth. Tharoor’s depiction of the Babri Masjid–Ram Janmabhoomi dispute shows how religious myth—specifically the belief that Ram was born at the mosque’s site—produces real-world violence despite lacking historical evidence. The myth becomes historical through its performative consequences. The unresolved mystery of Priscilla’s murder mirrors the elusiveness of truth when myth and memory collide. Tharoor thereby enacts a “postmodern breach of canon,” wherein historical reality is not static but negotiated through narrative fragments.

The narrative structure of Riot facilitates this interrogation of truth through multiplicity, a point central to Mr. Kazim Ali’s analysis in “Plurality of Truth: A Narrative Analysis of Shashi Tharoor's Riot”. Ali asserts that “in a culturally and religiously plural country like India, truth can never be single” (Ali 263). Tharoor’s fragmented form—comprising interviews, documents, letters, and personal reflections—eschews linearity in favor of pluralism. Characters such as Ram Charan, Priscilla, Lakshman, and Rudyard articulate divergent interpretations of events, suggesting that reality is contingent on perspective. Lakshman encapsulates this ethos when he tells Priscilla, “The one thing about truth, my dear, is that you can only talk of it in the plural” (Tharoor 137). Ali’s assertion that truth is shaped by “the degree of your knowledge” resonates with the novel’s structural resistance to singular narratives. Tharoor’s postmodern lens reflects the complexities of India’s socio-political landscape, where truth itself becomes a terrain of conflict.

Dr. Ambreen Kharbe interrogates the manipulation of national identity in her article “History, Politics, Religion and Cultural Conflict in Shashi Tharoor's Riot”. She warns against the perils of India’s celebrated motto—unity in diversity—arguing that “the danger of ‘unity in diversity’ and how the political parties, for their mutual benefits, turn the simple issues in communal Riots” (Kharbe 112) demonstrates the fragility of multicultural harmony. Tharoor critiques this distortion through the character of Ram Charan Gupta, whose self-fashioned identity as a Hindu savior is strategically deployed to incite communal paranoia. Gupta’s rhetoric casts secularism and pluralism as existential threats to Hindu culture. Through this construction, Tharoor illustrates how nationalism is manufactured through fear and religious myth-making. Gupta does not merely believe in his ideology—he performs it for political utility, showing how cultural identity becomes a tool for authoritarian control.

Shashi Tharoor’s Riot: A Love Story offers a piercing meditation on the fault lines within Indian society, and critics have emphasized its resonances across political, historical, and cultural

dimensions. In her article "Understanding Contemporary India in Shashi Tharoor's Riot", Mina Shalik Patil asserts that the novel "sheds light on the darker aspects of Indian society, including social inequality, communal tensions, and government inadequacies" (Patil 740). These structural failures are not abstracted but rendered painfully intimate through the character of Lakshman, an experienced bureaucrat who witnesses the brewing communal unrest but remains constrained by institutional inertia. His inability to intervene effectively becomes emblematic of the state's complicity—his inaction a testament to how bureaucratic indifference helps incubate catastrophe. Through Lakshman's frustration, Tharoor exposes the tragedy of a state that not only fails to prevent communal violence but, in its passivity, becomes an accomplice to it. Patil's critique finds full expression in this depiction of a morally paralyzed administrative machine.

Shagufta Parween, in "Rethinking History: A Study of Shashi Tharoor's Riot as a Postmodern Historiographic Metafiction", identifies Tharoor's narrative as "a quintessential postmodern historiographic metafiction" (Parween 56). This classification invites readers to see Riot not simply as a story about historical events but as a reflection on the very instability and multiplicity of historical narratives themselves. The form of the novel—with its collage of newspaper clippings, interviews, letters, and diary entries—mirrors Lakshman's literary ambition: "that doesn't read like a novel" (Tharoor 135), but a work in which meaning is constantly reshaped depending on the reader's path through the text (Tharoor 136). Such an architecture insists on the impossibility of a singular or authoritative version of truth. In doing so, Riot resists totalizing discourse and affirms postmodern historiography's claim that history is a site of textual construction and contestation rather than fixed fact.

In "Shashi Tharoor's Riot: Perspectives on History, Politics and Culture", Paras Dhir draws attention to the polyphonic narrative mode through which Tharoor articulates the cultural contradictions of India. He describes the novel as "a multilayered narrative that sheds light on many contemporary issues on history, politics and culture of India" (Dhir 1). This multiplicity is manifest in the careful representation of divergent ideologies—ranging from Hindu majoritarianism to secular liberalism to Muslim assertions of equal belonging. The political and cultural tension is articulated with poignancy through the voice of Mohammad Sarwar, who states, "Islam has now as great a claim on the soil of India as Hinduism" (Tharoor 108). Such assertions are not just declarations of religious identity but critiques of the political forces that weaponize culture for hegemonic ends. Dhir captures the essence of Tharoor's artistic project: to render visible the intersections of personal stories and political manipulation, where myth, memory, and meaning are constantly reshaped in the contest for power.

Discussion/Analysis

Shashi Tharoor's Riot: A Love Story deploys the historically charged contexts of the 1984 anti-Sikh violence and the 1992 Babri Masjid controversy to interrogate the politicization of memory and history. Characters in the novel assert present superiority by reframing the past, reflecting Louis Montrose's notion that history is a product of ideological construction rather than a stable account of the past. This manipulation is encapsulated when Priscilla Hart records in her diary, "Though Lakshman tells me there is no proof there ever was a temple there" (Tharoor 22), revealing a tension between mythic memory and historiographic evidence. The novel's central event—the 1989 Zalilgarh Riot, during which Priscilla is killed while volunteering on a women's health project—exemplifies how myth becomes instrumentalized for violence. Ram Charan Gupta embodies Hindu nationalist rhetoric, defending the demolition of the Babri Masjid as a rectification of past wrongs, while the secular historian Mohammad Sarwar dismantles this claim by pointing to the absence of any documented historical evidence. The calculated path of the Ram Sila Poojan procession "past the town's Muslim quarters, where the resistance to Ram Janmabhoomi agitation was high" (Tharoor 5) exemplifies how mythologized history is performed as political aggression. Here, Montrose's framework becomes crucial, as Riot critiques how

narratives of the past are embedded within language-based power structures that consolidate present ideologies.

Lakshman's observation that "They (Hindus) want revenge against history, but they do not realize that history is its own revenge" (Tharoor 147) underscores how revisionist historical narratives fuel cyclical violence. This sentiment reframes the Babri Masjid demolition as not just an act of religious extremism but as an ideological retaliation—a desire to avenge imagined historical injuries. However, Lakshman's bureaucratic rationalism contrasts this impulse, signaling the danger of weaponizing historical wounds for contemporary gains. The consequence is tragic and ironic: efforts to correct history perpetuate the trauma they seek to redress, as exemplified in the death of Priscilla—an outsider who "died in a Riot she had nothing to do with" (Tharoor 3). The destructive loop of memory and grievance in Riot reflects Montrose's insight into the ideological production of history and its deeply violent implications when tied to identity politics.

Tharoor challenges the epistemology of historical truth through narrative structure. Lakshman's pointed query—"But who owns India's history? Are there my history and his, and his history about my history?" (Tharoor 110)—foregrounds the contested nature of historiographical authority. The novel adopts a deliberately fragmented form—comprising interviews, clippings, official documents, and personal narratives—disrupting linear historiography and resisting singular truth claims. This fragmentation aligns with Montrose's theory of historicity, demonstrating that power structures not only shape events but also govern how those events are remembered, recorded, and transmitted. The bureaucracy, media, and political classes selectively curate collective memory, reinforcing the hegemony of dominant narratives.

The unstable status of history is further emphasized when Lakshman writes to Priscilla, "truth is elusive… you can only speak of it in the plural" (Tharoor 137). This epistemological pluralism underscores how historical memory is mediated through ideological filters and individual subjectivities. Each character's account—be it Ram Charan Gupta's communal ideology, Sarwar's secular nationalism, or Lakshman's ambivalent bureaucratic stance—presents history as a site of ongoing negotiation. Such multiplicity aligns with Linda Hutcheon's concept of historiographic metafiction, wherein fiction remains self-reflexively aware of its entanglement with historical discourse. Riot, as a historiographic metafiction, problematizes the distinction between fact and narrative, revealing history as a politically contaminated archive of contested truths.

Mohammad Sarwar functions as Riot's most powerful voice against communal historiography. His critique—"The Hindutva brigade is trying to invent a new past for the nation, fabricating historical wrongs, dredging up 'evidence' of Muslim malfeasance and misappropriation of national glory" (Tharoor 67)—reveals the tactical use of memory for exclusionary politics. Sarwar's plea for scholars to "dig into the myths that divide and unite our people" (Tharoor 67) calls for a critical historiographical engagement that resists hegemonic distortions. In his voice, Tharoor underscores the necessity of examining how historical fabrication bolsters ethno-nationalist ideologies while marginalizing pluralist legacies.

This politicization of cultural identity is laid bare when Sarwar observes, "Indian Muslims suffer disadvantages, even discrimination, in a hundred ways" (Tharoor 112), challenging the liberal myth of Indian secularism. He critiques the selective memorialization that canonizes syncretic figures like Nizamuddin Auliya and Ghazi Miyan while marginalizing contemporary Muslim identity. Sarwar's trenchant claim—"Muslims didn't partition the country; the British did; so did the Muslim League; so did the Congress" (Tharoor 111)—deconstructs the singular blame often ascribed to Indian Muslims, thus exposing the political revisionism that fuels communal narratives. Through Sarwar, Riot engages with Montrose's politics of culture and Greenblatt's self-fashioning, where memory and identity are constructed under ideological pressures, often to the exclusion of historical nuance and cultural coexistence.

In Riot: A Love Story, Shashi Tharoor addresses the complexities of cultural identity, communal memory, and political manipulation through characters who embody contesting narratives of history and belonging. Mohammed Sarwar, the secular Muslim historian, interrogates the reduction of Muslim identity to the Partition narrative, stating emphatically, "Pakistan was created by 'bad' Muslims, secular Muslims, not by the 'good' Muslims" (Tharoor 109). This challenges the majoritarian myth that Indian Muslims willingly chose separation. Sarwar highlights Maulana Maudoodi's opposition to Pakistan and invokes Iqbal's cautionary metaphor: "Our civilization that will commit suicide out of its complexity; he who builds a nest on frail branches is doomed to destruction" (Tharoor 67), a critique of exclusionary nationalism. Emphasizing Islam's ethical egalitarianism, Sarwar insists it brought "the most precious of gifts... the message of human equality" (Tharoor 108) to Indian culture. He affirms, "Islam has now as great a claim on the soil of India as Hinduism" (Tharoor 108), thus reclaiming Muslim identity as integral to Indian civilization.

Tharoor explores cultural politics through the relationship between Lakshman and Priscilla Hart. Lakshman's unease at Priscilla's sexual freedom—"These guys you went out with, did you sleep with them?" (Tharoor 83)—highlights the ideological conflict between Western liberalism and Indian conservatism. Lakshman's insistence that "Zalilgarh is not America... here it is different" (Tharoor 13) and his veneration of his wife Gita's chastity ("She was a virgin... she hadn't even held hands with one" [Tharoor 83]) situates love within cultural prescriptions. His belief that "marriage leads to love... because it is rooted in something fundamental in our society" (Tharoor 103) underscores the communal anchoring of personal relationships. Through this, Tharoor critiques the societal imposition on emotions, illustrating how cultural values regulate affection, sexual morality, and gender roles.

Gendered cultural politics are laid bare in Priscilla's poem, which describes women's subjugation: "Serve their men first, eat what is left... submit unprotected / To the heaving thrusts of their protectors" (Tharoor 15). Fatima Bi's coerced pregnancies and Sundri's abuse despite a hefty dowry exemplify structural patriarchy. Sundri's mother-in-law's scorn—"What use of this woman who... cannot even produce a son" (Tharoor 48)—reveals the deeply embedded misogyny within familial and social systems. Symbolic veneration of women contrasts violently with their lived oppression.

The Mandir-Masjid conflict further reveals how culture is politicized to foster communal polarization. Ram Charan Gupta's belief that temple demolition was "a deliberately adapted imperial strategy" (Tharoor 54) and his assertion that Muslims are "more loyal to a foreign religion" (Tharoor 54), calling them "a lemon squirted into the cream of India" (Tharoor 57), display cultural othering. The toxic slogans, "Musalman ke do hi sthan: Pakistan ya kabrasthan" and "Has ke liya tha Pakistan, ladke lenge Hindustan" (Tharoor 120), reflect a grotesque cultural rupture. Tharoor critiques how majoritarian politics weaponize historical grievance to marginalize minorities.

Lakshman’s identity crisis represents Stephen Greenblatt’s self-fashioning: "I am torn between two kinds of love... I chose the love for my daughter over my love for you" (Tharoor 120). His struggle between modern individualism and traditional responsibility reflects identity formation under societal constraints. Sarwar, reflecting on artificial communal divisions, observes, "on a train, we are all indistinguishable from any other Indian middle-class family" (Tharoor 115), challenging the performativity of identity. He critiques the "intellectual cancer of thinking of 'us' and 'them'" (Tharoor 114) and mourns that "Pakistanis will never understand the depth of the disservice Jinnah did us... when he made some of us into non-Indians" (Tharoor 111).

Lakshman also performs a self-conscious act of secular Hindu identity: "Hinduism embraces an eclectic range of doctrines... there are none" (Tharoor 143). He affirms, "as a Hindu I belong to the only major religion... that does not claim to be the only true religion" (Tharoor 143), opposing Hindutva narratives through a pluralist self-fashioning.

Riot argues that identity is historically and culturally constructed, contested in a political space of inherited memories and public myths. Lakshman's list—"language, region, caste, class, and religion" (Tharoor 100)—as sources of division affirms that selfhood in India is not autonomous but mediated by socio-political histories. Riot, with its polyphonic narrative, critiques the politics of culture, inviting an India not built on exclusion but on an ever-negotiated plurality.

Conclusion

Shashi Tharoor's Riot concludes not in resolution but in reverberation—echoing the entangled histories, ruptured identities, and cultural manipulations that continue to haunt India's democratic project. Situated at the intersection of personal desire, public duty, and historical trauma, the novel foregrounds that communal violence is neither spontaneous nor singular—it is the outcome of inherited fictions and ideological sediment. Through its fragmentary structure and multivocal discourse, Riot dismantles monolithic historiography and affirms the plural, unstable, and performative nature of selfhood in a politicized landscape. Riot demands an ethical re-engagement with the past—one that resists erasure, embraces complexity, and envisions reconciliation beyond rhetoric.

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